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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LAGOS 000375

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/31/2019  
TAGS: PGOV KCOR KCRM ECON SOCI NI  
SUBJECT: NIGERIA: AMNESTY ENDS ON A HIGH NOTE BUT WHAT NEXT?

REF: A. LAGOS 372  
1B. LAGOS 371  
1C. ABUJA 1669  
1D. LAGOS 369  
1E. LAGOS 362 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: A/Consul General Richard Walsh, Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) Summary: With the last-minute surrender of a tearful Tom Polo, all major militant leaders accepted amnesty. What comes next, from the GON or the militants, remains unclear. The GON's modest but largely unexpected success should give the Delta at least a temporary respite, but under-development and other acute regional challenges remain to be addressed. End Summary.

Prominent Leaders Accept GON's Amnesty

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12. (C) With the surrender of Tom Polo and Farah Dagogo on October 3, all significant militant commanders accepted the GON's amnesty offer. This included all key militant leaders associated with the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), namely Henry Okah (July 13), "Boyloaf" (August 7), Sobomo George (August 13), "Tom Polo" (October 3), and Farah Dagogo, who called himself the "overall field commander" for MEND in his statement issued October 3. A number of other prominent militant leaders not directly associated with MEND, such as "General Africa" (August 23) and Ateke Tom (October 1), also surrendered. Large caches of small arms, ammunition and some heavy weapons, including gun-boats, were handed over at various centers between June 24 and October 4.

Questions Remain

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13. (C) By all accounts, large quantities of government cash and political pressure drove the so-called "repentants" to the table, often in lavish surrender ceremonies in Abuja or the Delta. Tom Polo, the last of the major holdouts, had listed a series of political preconditions for his surrender, including development aid for his home area, but at his ceremony at the Presidential villa in Abuja, he choked up and was apparently unable to deliver a statement prepared for the occasion.

14. (C) Many Niger Delta anti-GON activists allege that the surrendered arms represented only a small fraction of the militants' armory or the weapons were even "lent" by the government to dress up the event. They also claim that many

of the leaders' followers who allegedly signed up for amnesty are "phantoms" designed simply to bolster GON "rehabilitation" payments to illicit beneficiaries (Ref A).

#### Discontent Among the Reformed Militants

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¶ 15. (C) There may already be cracks in the ranks of the repentants. Alleging that their leader "Boyloaf" had pocketed 10 million naira but they had received nothing, about 200 former militants rioted in Yenagoa, the state capital of Bayelsa, on September 4 and again on September 7. In addition, 300 ex-militants staged a violent protest in the same city on September 25, claiming that the amnesty implementation committee had failed to keep its promise to pay them regular allowances. In Port Harcourt, protests by over 100 ex-militants undergoing skills acquisition training turned violent on September 29. According to press reports, the Port Harcourt protesters carried signs calling on the GON to "pay us our money" and "don't leave us unsettled."

#### Possible Militant Regrouping

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¶ 16. (C) On October 3, MEND spokesman Jomo Gbomo reiterated his claim that MEND had urged commanders to accept the amnesty to allow a new generation of leaders to take their place in the field of battle. Meanwhile, new groups claiming to fight for the "oppressed" peoples of the Niger Delta have emerged, notably the "Urhobo Revolutionary Army," which took responsibility for the attack on the Utorogun Gas

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Plant in August, and "Watch Dog of the Niger Delta," which issued a statement on September 30 that called the government amnesty program a "fraud." The strength and credibility of these groups is unknown.

#### What Now?

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¶ 17. (C) Kano Governor Ibrahim Shekarau, of the opposition All Nigeria People's Party, noted to PolCouns on October 5 that the GON could have undercut the Niger Delta militancy had it engaged in a constructive dialogue with the region's inhabitants years ago. He appeared skeptical that amnesty would last since it did not address the underlying causes of militancy. He also complained that the GON, belatedly trying to contain the damage, had relied too much on "carrots," first by creating the feckless Niger Delta Ministry and then by agreeing to "settle" individual militant leaders with large payouts.

¶ 18. (C) Niger Delta Technical Committee (NDTC) member retired Lieutenant Colonel Paul Obi called amnesty "putting the cart before the horse" in a recent roundtable discussion organized by ConGen Lagos. He affirmed that the failure to implement the development components of the NDTC Report would "completely shatter" the GON's credibility. Civil activist Patrick Naagbaton pointed out that "guns are like mobile phones - you can get them anywhere," and warned that violence can easily return to the Niger Delta if people do not see concrete evidence of investment and development very shortly.

#### Comment

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¶ 19. (C) Through a combination of cash, political manipulation, and military pressure, the GON succeeded in corralling all major militant leaders in its amnesty program. But it remains unclear what comes next, and whether the repentants will stay on the sidelines or whether new groups will replace them in the field. There is no indication that the GON has written a second act for this drama, beyond a poorly conceived and designed rehabilitation process for ex-militants. It is hard to be

optimistic. As the 2011 election pre-season gets underway, the Yar'Adua administration seems unlikely to take any action that might jeopardize its own short-term national or regional interests, including oil bunkering. In addition, given the region's acute under-development and the very low skill levels of most ex-militants, even a determined effort to create large-scale jobs is likely to come up short. And lurking in the background are the public and private threats of the defense minister to hit hard against any militant resurgence. Despite all this, the successful conclusion of the amnesty period is a real if modest accomplishment that few observers predicted, and it should be enough to give the region a respite from militant violence, at least temporarily. End Comment.

¶10. (C) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Abuja.

WALSH